A detective Tiffany Carney of Växjö case.

THE PAST PRESENT KILLER

THANOS KALAMIDAS

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The cleaning woman, Marta, found her. It was six-fifteen on a Tuesday morning in November, the sky beyond the smoked-glass windows of Gallive Investments a bruised, reluctant blue. Marta had a key card for the executive floor, a privilege hard-won over fifteen years of nocturnal servitude. She liked the silence up there, the weight of money and power that settled into the carpets like a held breath.

But that morning, the door to office 1407 was ajar. A sliver of absolute darkness. She pushed it, her cart of industrial polishes and vacuums a comforting anchor in the hallway. The smell hit her first, a metallic, coppery scent that cut through the lemon-scented floor cleaner. Then the light from the corridor spilled in, revealing the pale, outstretched hand on the expensive Persian rug. It was the hand of a woman who

had, Marta knew, a reputation for being impeccably dressed. The manicured nails were flawless but the fingers were curled, frozen in a gesture that might have been a plea or a point.

Marta didn't scream. She backed out, her hand over her mouth and dialled the security desk with a trembling finger. The body was that of Berta Ekerlid, the marketing director. She had been shot twice. Once in the chest, once in the head. The killers—for the forensic team would later deduce there had been two, based on the uncoordinated placement of shell casings, had not been tidy. They had not been professionals. They had been angry, or desperate, or both.

1.
The widow's lens

Detective Inspector Tiffany Carney stood in the doorway of office 1407, a place where the blood had already begun to turn a dull, rusty brown. She was a woman in her early fifties, her face a carefully composed mask that belied a mind working with the quiet, relentless precision of a loom. Grief was a familiar weight on her shoulders; it had taken up residence fourteen months ago when her husband, David, had succumbed to the cancer that had hollowed him out. She understood its texture, its capacity to distort perception. It made her, she believed, a better detective. She no longer looked for grand, cinematic motives. She looked for the small, quiet desperations.

"Two shots," she said to DS Neil Paxton, her junior by twenty years and eager as a spaniel. "One to stop her, one to make sure. Overkill. Personal."

Paxton nodded, making notes. "Cleaners found her. No forced entry. Her key card was used to access the floor at nineteen forty-two last night."

"So she let them in, or they had their own card. Or they were already here." Tiffany crouched, not touching anything, just looking. Berta Ekerlid's handbag was on her desk, neatly arranged. Her phone was in it. No sign of a struggle. "She knew them. She was sitting behind her desk, then got up, came around. To talk. That's when the first shot was fired."

She straightened up, her knees protesting. The initial reports from uniform were already in her head: Berta Ekerlid, forty-four, no children, estranged from her husband, Anders. A woman who had poured her considerable energy into her career, making Gallive Investments a formidable name in sustainable infrastructure. Tiffany's first suspects were always the nearest and the most obvious; the spouse, the competitor.

"I want to talk to the husband first," she said. "And get me everything on their main rivals, Nordsjö Cap-

ital and Alder & Reed. I want to know who lost the most money on Gallive's last big win."

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Anders Ekerlid lived in a pristine white townhouse in the Östermalm district, a monument to a marriage that had clearly been curated rather than lived in. He was a tall, gaunt man in his late forties with the harried look of someone whose carefully structured life had been suddenly, violently dismantled. He answered the door in a dark sweater, his eyes red-rimmed but dry.

"Detective Inspector," he said, his voice flat. "They told me. I still… I can't…"

Tiffany accepted a seat in a living room that felt like a showroom. She didn't offer condolences. Not yet. She watched him.

"When did you last see your wife, Mr. Ekerlid?"

"A week ago. She came to collect some things. She'd been staying at the company apartment for the last month." He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "We were in the process of divorcing."

"Who initiated the divorce?"

A flicker of something... shame or perhaps anger, crossed his face. “I did.”

“On what grounds?”

He looked at her then, a direct, challenging gaze. “Her absence. She was married to that company. I was a ghost in my own home. And I’m not a fool, Inspector. There were late nights, trips that didn’t add up. Perfume that wasn’t hers.” He paused, his jaw tightening. “I suspected she was involved with someone. I asked her. She didn’t deny it.”

Tiffany let the silence stretch, a technique she’d learned from David, who had been a barrister. People rushed to fill the void, often with the truth.

Anders obliged. “She laughed. She said I was a provincial clerk who didn’t understand the world she moved in. That was the last conversation we had.”

“Did you kill your wife, Mr. Ekerlid?”

The question hung in the air. He didn’t flinch. “No. I wanted a divorce, not a headline. I wanted her to feel the emptiness of her choices, not… not this.” His voice cracked, the first genuine fissure in his facade. He might not have loved her, Tiffany thought, but he

had loved the idea of her, the possession of her. And that loss was a wound all its own.

"Where were you last night between seven and nine?"

"At home. Alone. I have no one to corroborate that." He met her eyes again, this time with a bitter resignation. "I suppose that makes me your perfect suspect."

"It makes you a person of interest, Mr. Ekerlid. Don't leave town."

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On her way out, Tiffany's phone buzzed. Paxton had already compiled the initial file on Gallive's competitors. Nordsjö Capital was a rival with a reputation for aggressive takeovers. Their CEO, a man named Viggo Landström, had a criminal record for assault from his youth. Alder & Reed were a British firm who had lost a major infrastructure bid to Gallive six months prior, a loss that had reportedly left them reeling.

But as she read, her focus narrowed. A name from Berta Ekerlid's past had surfaced in a note from uniform, she had attended Uppsala University, the same

as Magnus Eklund, the CEO of Gallive Investments. They had been in the same social circle, a fact that hadn't appeared in the initial company bio. Tiffany's instinct, honed by decades of listening to what people ...didn't say, prickled.

The link between the present and the past was rarely a straight line. It was a hidden seam, a fault line that, when stressed, would crack the whole edifice open. She got in her car, a modest Volvo, and headed for the Gallive headquarters. She needed to meet Magnus Eklund.

2.
The gilded cage

Gallive Investments occupied a tower of glass and steel that pierced the Stockholm skyline. The interior was a temple to minimalist wealth, pale oak, white leather and the kind of silence that money buys. Tiffany was led to the top floor, where Magnus Eklund's office was a corner suite with panoramic views of the city's rooftops and the grey, choppy waters of the archipelago.

Eklund rose from behind a vast desk as she entered. He was a man in his late forties, handsome in a way that suggested a lifetime of being told he was handsome. Tall, with a full head of silver-grey hair, a sharp suit, and the easy, practiced smile of a born salesman. A recent divorce had left him leaner, Tiffany noted, with a restless energy in his blue eyes.

“Detective Inspector,” he said, his voice a warm baritone. “A terrible, terrible business. Berta was a cornerstone of this company. How can I help?”

Tiffany took the seat opposite him, declining the coffee his assistant immediately offered. She watched him settle back into his chair, a man who was used to controlling the narrative.

“You and Mrs. Ekerlid went back a long way,” she began. It wasn’t a question.

A flicker. The smile didn’t waver, but his posture shifted, a subtle recalibration. “We did. Uppsala. She was a brilliant student. Driven. I was a few years ahead, but we moved in the same circles. When I came to Gallive, I knew she was the person I needed for marketing. I headhunted her myself, eight years ago.”

“You were friends?”

“We were colleagues. Respected colleagues. I’m the CEO, Inspector. I have to maintain a certain distance.” He leaned forward, his expression turning earnest. “I know what the gossip mill will be saying. The recent divorce, my… unfortunate reputation. But Berta and I were not involved. That would have

been unprofessional, not to mention a betrayal of my marriage at the time."

"Your marriage ended four months ago," Tiffany said. "Mrs. Ekerlid's husband filed for divorce a month ago, citing his belief that she was having an affair. Do you know who with?"

Magnus held her gaze. The practiced ease was gone, replaced by something harder, more guarded. "Berta was a very private person. She never discussed her personal life with me. I only knew what I saw ....a woman who was utterly dedicated to this company. If she had a personal life, it was her own affair." He paused, letting the unintended pun land. "I'm sorry. Poor choice of words. The point is, I don't know who she was seeing. If she was seeing anyone. It could have been a fiction her husband created to justify his own inadequacies."

Tiffany let that sit. She then shifted tack. "I'll also need to ask about the company's business rivals. Nordsjö Capital, Alder & Reed. Have there been any recent threats? Any escalation in competition?"

Magnus's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Competition in our field is fierce, but it's commercial. We play by the rules. If you're asking if a rival

firm murdered my marketing director, I'd say you're looking in the wrong direction. Berta was brilliant but she wasn't the one holding the purse strings. The real battles are fought over funding, not taglines."

He was too smooth, Tiffany thought. He answered every question with a polished deflection. But she had seen the flicker when she mentioned the affair. It wasn't the reaction of a man learning about a subordinate's private life. It was the reaction of a man who knew something he didn't want to share.

"Thank you, Mr. Eklund. I'll be speaking with your staff. I trust you'll make them available."

"Of course. Whatever you need." He stood, offering his hand. His grip was firm, dry, and held a beat too long. "I want whoever did this to Berta caught, Inspector. She deserved better."

As Tiffany walked back through the open-plan office, she felt eyes on her. Whispers. Berta Ekerlid's desk was on the floor below, now a shrine of wilting flowers. She took the stairs, wanting to feel the atmosphere. At the marketing department, she introduced herself to Berta's personal assistant, a nervous young woman named Elin who looked like she hadn't slept.

"She was working late a lot," Elin said, her voice hushed. "The last few months especially. She'd tell me to go home, that she had things to finalize."

"Did you ever come back? Forgot something, needed to pick something up?"

Elin hesitated. Tiffany saw the calculation in her eyes, loyalty versus fear. "Once," she whispered. "About three weeks ago. I came back to get my headphones. The lights were off in the main office, but I saw a light on in her office. I was about to knock, but… I heard voices. Hers, and a man's. They weren't talking about work."

"What were they talking about?"

"I don't know. The tone. It was… intimate. Low. I left. I didn't want to know." She looked up, her eyes wide. "I thought it might be her husband, you know? Trying to reconcile. But he never came to the office. Ever."

"Could you identify the voice?"

"No. It was just a murmur. I'm sorry."

Tiffany thanked her and left, her mind assembling a new picture. Berta Ekerlid, a woman who lived for

her work, begins working late. She is having an affair with a man who comes to her office after hours. Her husband asks for a divorce. She is found shot in that same office. The link was not just the company. It was the office itself. It was the locus of her double life.

She needed to find the man in the shadows. And her instincts kept circling back to the handsome, divorced CEO on the top floor, with his smooth deflections and his shared history with Berta that went back two decades.

3.
Shadows of the past

The next morning, Tiffany drove to Uppsala. The university town was quiet in the November grey, its ancient spires and cobbled streets holding a history of youthful ambition. She had requested the university's alumni records and had spent the previous evening cross-referencing names. Magnus Eklund and Berta Ekerlid, née Lindgren, had been part of a tight-knit group of economics students. A third name kept appearing alongside theirs, Henrik Ljungberg.

A quick search revealed Henrik Ljungberg was now a professor of economic history at the university. Tiffany found him in a cramped, book-lined office that smelled of old paper and pipe smoke. He was

a stocky, bearded man in his early fifties, with kind eyes and the distracted air of an academic. He looked up from a pile of student essays with surprise when she introduced herself.

"Berta?" he said, his face paling. "I saw it in the news, of course. But I still can't… I hadn't spoken to her in years. Not properly."

"You were close at university?"

A sad smile touched his lips. "We were a gang. Magnus, Berta, myself, a few others. We were going to conquer the world. Magnus was the charismatic one, the one with the vision. Berta was the brilliant one, the one who could make the vision a reality. I was the… observer, I suppose." He gestured for her to sit.

"What happened to the group?"

"Life. Ambition. Magnus went straight into the financial world, married well. Berta followed a similar path. I went into academia. We drifted." He paused, removing his glasses and polishing them with a cloth. "There was a falling out, towards the end. Our final year."

"What kind of falling out?"

Henrik hesitated, the silence of a man who has kept a secret for a long time. “Magnus and Berta were involved. Intensely. Everyone knew it, though they tried to be discreet. He was seeing someone else as well, a woman from a wealthy family, his future wife, as it turned out. When that woman found out about Berta, there was a scene. Accusations. Berta was devastated. She left the university for a few weeks. When she came back, she was different. Harder. She cut Magnus off completely. She said she was done with him, done with being a ‘footnote in his grand plan.’”

“And you? How did you feel about all this?”

Henrik put his glasses back on, a defensive gesture. “I was in love with her. I had been for two years. She never knew. Or if she did, she never acknowledged it. I was the safe friend, the one who listened. When she cut Magnus off, I was… relieved. I thought maybe she’d see me. But she didn’t. She met Anders a few years later, and that was that. She built a wall around herself. I always suspected Magnus was the reason.”

Tiffany let the weight of that unrequited love settle in the room. “You said you hadn’t spoken to her in years. But you kept tabs on her?”

A flush crept up his neck. “I read about her. The company’s successes. I was proud of her, in a way. I knew she worked for Magnus. I often wondered why she agreed to that, after everything. It seemed like a kind of self-imposed penance.”

“Or a way to stay close to him,” Tiffany suggested.

Henrik nodded slowly, a painful understanding in his eyes. “Yes. Or that.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

Back in Stockholm, Tiffany cross-referenced the new information with the financial investigation Paxton had initiated into Gallive Investments. A pattern was emerging. Whispers of embezzlement, funds channelled from the company into a series of shell companies based in the Baltics. The trail was expertly hidden, but the amounts were significant. And the CEO, Magnus Eklund, had ultimate sign-off on all major transfers.

Tiffany sat in her office that evening, the city lights blurring beyond the window. The case was no longer about a cheating wife or a jealous husband. It was about a man who had used a brilliant woman in his youth, discarded her, and then, years later, drawn her

back into his orbit. What had he promised her? A share of the embezzled money? A true partnership this time? And what had happened when she had either demanded more or threatened to expose him?

She picked up her phone. "Paxton, I need everything on Magnus Eklund's financials. Personal and corporate. And I want a full timeline of his and Berta Ekerlid's movements over the last three months. Every business trip, every late-night entry to the office. We're looking for the moment their past caught up with their present."

The key, she was sure, lay in the space between what Magnus Eklund presented to the world and the truth he had buried beneath layers of charm and ambition. And Berta Ekerlid, the woman who had once loved him and had been burned by him, had held that key. It had cost her life.

4.
The other woman

The next phase of the investigation required Tiffany to step into the rarefied world of Stockholm's financial elite. She had arranged to meet the ex-Mrs. Eklund, a woman named Sofia, at her apartment in the exclusive district of Djursholm. The house was a nineteenth-century manor, impeccably restored, a monument to the lifestyle Sofia had just lost.

Sofia Eklund was a tall, elegant blonde in her mid-forties, dressed in expensive cashmere. She had the polished, untouchable air of a woman who had been raised to manage a certain kind of crisis with grace. She offered Tiffany tea in a silver service, and they sat in a conservatory overlooking a manicured garden, the grey November light muted by the glass.

"I assume this is about Magnus," Sofia said, her voice cool. "And that poor woman, Berta. I told the police when they called yesterday. I was at my sister's in Gothenburg on the night she was killed. I have the receipts, the boarding passes. I didn't kill her. I have no reason to."

"You knew Mrs. Ekerlid?"

Sofia's lips thinned. "I knew of her. She was a ghost from the past. Magnus's past. When he told me he was hiring her, I told him it was a mistake. He said it was just business, that she was the best. I should have known then. Magnus always had a blind spot when it came to her."

"What do you mean?"

Sofia set down her teacup with a delicate clink. "I know about their affair at university. I was the woman from the wealthy family, Inspector. The one he chose. And for twenty years, I believed I'd won. But when he brought her back, I saw the old light in his eyes. The excitement. He started working late, taking 'business trips' that I later found out she was also on. Our marriage was already crumbling, his ego, the constant rumours about other women—but Berta was the final nail."

"You believe the affair resumed?"

"I don't believe. I know. I found a receipt in his jacket pocket. A hotel in Copenhagen. The date coincided with a business trip they were both on. I confronted him. He denied it, of course. Called me paranoid. But I'd had enough. I filed for divorce." She looked at Tiffany, her composure finally cracking, revealing a deep, simmering rage. "He's a taker, Inspector. He takes people, uses them, and discards them. He took my youth, my money ...my reputation. He took Berta's talent and her loyalty. And I suspect, in the end, he took her life."

"Why would he kill her? If they were having an affair, why murder her?"

Sofia gave a bitter, knowing smile. "Because Berta was finally done being taken from. She was a clever woman. She knew the company inside and out. I heard whispers, even before the divorce, about money going missing. If Berta knew about that, if she decided she was no longer content to be his mistress and wanted her share ...or wanted to expose him, Magnus would see her as a threat. And Magnus, for all his charm, eliminates threats. He doesn't negotiate with them."

Tiffany drove away from Djursholm with the pieces beginning to align. The affair was real. The embezzlement was real. And Berta Ekerlid, the woman who had once been discarded, had become a liability. But the murder scene spoke of two people, angry, desperate. Had Magnus hired someone? Or had Berta's other secrets drawn another predator into the mix?

Her phone rang. It was Paxton.

"Boss, I've got something. The financial forensics team found a secondary account linked to the shell companies. It wasn't just Magnus Eklund dipping into the funds. There were irregular transfers to a private account held by Berta Ekerlid. They started three months ago. A quarter of a million kronor, then another, then another."

Tiffany's pulse quickened. "She was blackmailing him."

"That's what it looks like. But here's the thing. The last transfer was made two days before she was killed. And it was for the full remaining balance of the embezzled funds, nearly eight million kronor. It was set up to go through, but it was cancelled from the source account hours before she was found dead."

"Cancelled by whom?"

"We're waiting for the bank to confirm, but the authorization came from an executive-level account at Gallive. Only four people have that clearance. Eklund is one of them."

Tiffany thanked him and ended the call. The picture was now horrifyingly clear. Berta had been blackmailing Magnus, demanding her cut—perhaps for her silence, perhaps as restitution for the past. He had agreed, buying time. But in the end, he had chosen to cancel the payment and eliminate the problem. The question was, who had he brought with him to pull the trigger?

5.
A killer's face

The forensic psychology unit had provided a profile, the killers were likely known to the victim, one possibly with a personal connection, the other a facilitator. The use of two weapons, a 9mm pistol and a .22 caliber, suggested a lack of pre-planning, a spontaneous escalation. Tiffany had a warrant for Magnus Eklund's financial records and a surveillance team on his movements. But she needed the trigger-pullers. She needed to put a name to the face in the shadows.

She re-interviewed Elin, the PA and this time with a forensic psychologist present. Under gentle pressure, Elin admitted she had heard the voice more clearly than she'd first let on. She had been afraid. The man in Berta's office that evening had been angry. She had caught a few words "You promised," and "I'm not a child."

“She was talking to him like he was a subordinate,” Elin said, her voice trembling. “Like she was scolding him. But he was the one in power. I could feel it.”

“Could it have been Magnus Eklund?” Tiffany asked.

Elin shook her head vehemently. “No. His office is upstairs. He never came down to our floor. The voice was younger. Thinner.”

A new suspect. Tiffany had the financial team expand their search. They found it, a series of smaller, untraceable payments from Berta Ekerlid’s personal account to a man named Oscar Dahlberg. A name that meant nothing to Tiffany. A deep dive revealed Dahlberg was a former junior analyst at Gallive Investments, fired six months ago for “performance issues.” His picture showed a thin, intense man in his late twenties, with hollow cheeks and haunted eyes.

Paxton found him living in a rented room in a gritty suburb of Södertälje. When Tiffany and a uniformed officer knocked on his door at six in the morning, the door swung open on a scene of squalor. The room was a wreck, empty bottles of cheap vodka, fast-food wrappers, and, in the corner, a small arsenal of gun magazines. But no guns.

Oscar Dahlberg was not there. A neighbour said he'd left in a hurry the previous night, carrying a duffel bag.

Tiffany stood in the center of the room, her hands in her pockets, looking at the mess. On a small desk was a framed photograph. It was a company group photo, Gallive Investments' annual retreat. In it, a younger, happier Oscar Dahlberg stood on the periphery, but his eyes were fixed on a single figure in the center, Berta Ekerlid, laughing, her hand on the shoulder of Magnus Eklund.

"He was in love with her," Tiffany said softly. "Or he thought he was. She used him. For what?"

The answer came when they searched his laptop, which he'd left behind in his haste. The browsing history was a trail of obsession, Berta Ekerlid's LinkedIn profile, her Instagram (though she rarely posted), articles about Gallive Investments. And, crucially, a series of encrypted emails exchanged with a user named "M.E."

Paxton's tech team cracked the encryption within hours. The emails were a revelation. They showed that Oscar Dahlberg, the fired junior analyst, had been the one to initially uncover the embezzlement

scheme. Instead of reporting it, he had gone to Berta Ekerlid, his direct superior at the time, with the information. She had seen an opportunity. She had promised him a share, a way back into the company's good graces, if he helped her gather the evidence to blackmail Magnus Eklund.

She had used him as a tool, feeding his obvious infatuation, promising him a future. The last email from Berta to Oscar, sent three days before her death, was brief: "The final transfer is set. I'll meet you at the usual place Tuesday night. We can celebrate. Bring what we discussed."

The "usual place" was her office. And "what we discussed" was the evidence file, but Oscar, a volatile and desperate young man, had brought a different kind of protection.

Tiffany now understood. There had been two people in the office that night. Berta, expecting to finalize her escape with her protégé's help, and Oscar, who had arrived to find that the celebration was not the beginning of their life together, but the end of their arrangement. He had realized she was using him. Perhaps he had confronted her, demanded she leave Magnus, run away with him. And Berta, the

hardened woman who had learned to discard people from the master, had laughed.

That's when the first shot was fired.

But Oscar didn't own a 9mm pistol. The ballistics from the chest wound had come from a 9mm. The head shot was the .22, which matched a gun registered to… Tiffany stopped. She had Paxton pull the register. A .22 caliber pistol was registered to the home of Anders Ekerlid, the cuckolded husband. A gun he had reported as "lost" from his summer cottage two months prior.

The second shooter, the facilitator, was the man who had been given a gun and a motive by the master puppeteer. Magnus Eklund had not pulled the trigger, but he had armed the man who did.

6.
The unravelling

The manhunt for Oscar Dahlberg was intense but short. He was found two days later at a bus station in Malmö, trying to get a ferry to Copenhagen. He was dishevelled, hollow-eyed, and made no attempt to run when the officers approached. In his duffel bag was the .22 caliber pistol, a change of clothes, and a crumpled, tear-stained letter addressed to Berta, never sent.

Tiffany interviewed him in a sterile interview room in Malmö, the fluorescent lights bleaching the colour from his skin. He looked younger than his twenty-eight years, a frightened boy wearing a man's despair.

"Tell me what happened, Oscar," she said, her voice gentle but firm. She had learned that fear was a better solvent than aggression.

He stared at the table for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was a monotone. "I loved her. I know it sounds stupid. She was older, she was my boss. But she saw me. She saw that I was smart, that I had potential. When I found the money trail, I went to her because I trusted her. I thought she would protect me."

"Instead, she used you."

A tear slid down his cheek. "She said we could both get what we wanted. She wanted the money, the real money. She said it was her due, for what Magnus did to her years ago. She said he'd stolen her youth, her chance at a real life. She said I could have a share, enough to start over, and she'd make sure I got a good reference, a new job. But I didn't want the money. I wanted her."

"You wanted her to leave Magnus Eklund."

He nodded, a violent, jerky motion. "I thought… after the divorce from his wife, he'd be free. She'd been with him for months, meeting him after hours,

going on trips. I saw them. I followed her once, to Copenhagen. They were together. And she'd tell me it was just business, that it was part of the plan. But I knew. She was still in love with him. She was using me to hurt him and get his money at the same time."

"The night she died. What happened?"

Oscar closed his eyes. "She told me to come to the office. She said the last transfer was going through. We'd meet, I'd give her the flash drive with all the evidence, and she'd make the final call. I thought… I thought maybe it was finally over. Maybe she'd see that I was the one who'd been there for her, not him."

"But she didn't."

"No. I got there, and she was… triumphant. Gloating. She said Magnus had agreed to everything. He was going to pay her off, and she was leaving Gallive. She was going to travel, to finally live. I asked her about us. About the plan we had." His voice cracked. "She laughed. She said, 'Us? Oscar, you're a sweet boy, but this was a business arrangement. You got your money. Now be a good boy and disappear.'"

"And you shot her."

"I didn't mean to. I had the gun, the one he gave

me." He looked up, his eyes wide with a terrible clarity. "Magnus. He came to me a week before. He said he knew about the blackmail. He said Berta was unstable, dangerous. He said if I helped him, he'd give me a job, a real future. He gave me the gun. He said it was for protection, in case she tried to hurt us. But when she laughed at me, when I saw that she'd never cared… I just wanted her to stop. I wanted her to see me. I fired."

"And then Magnus fired the second shot."

Oscar nodded, his body crumpling. "He was there. He'd followed me. He was waiting in the stairwell. He must have heard the shot, because he came in. She was on the floor, but she was still moving, still trying to say something. He just looked at her, for a second, with this cold expression. Then he took his gun ...his own gun and he shot her. In the head. He said, 'Now we're both in this.' He made me wipe the guns, put the .22 in my bag. He said to run, to wait for his call. But there was no call. Just silence."

Tiffany sat back. The confession was damning, but it was the word of a desperate, spurned man against a powerful CEO. She needed corroboration. She needed Magnus Eklund's own confession, or evidence that placed him at the scene.

“He was wearing gloves, wasn’t he?” she asked.

Oscar nodded. “Leather. Black.”

“But you weren’t. When you wiped the gun, your prints were on it. His were on his own gun, but he wiped it before he put it back in his pocket. He was careful.”

“He’s always careful,” Oscar whispered. “That’s what she used to say.”

7.
The Lion in winter

The arrest of Magnus Eklund was a carefully orchestrated piece of theatre. Tiffany chose to do it in the lobby of Gallive Investments, at nine in the morning, with the full complement of employees watching. She wanted to strip him of his power, his carefully constructed world, in the place where he had felt most invincible.

He came out of the elevator, a cashmere coat draped over his arm, his silver hair immaculate. When he saw Tiffany and the two uniformed officers, his step faltered for just a fraction of a second. Then the smile appeared, the one he'd been using for decades.

“Detective Inspector. To what do I owe this… dramatic entrance?”

“Magnus Eklund, you are under arrest for the murder of Berta Ekerlid and conspiracy to commit murder. You have the right to remain silent…”

He held up a hand, the gesture of a CEO halting a presentation. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I have nothing to do with Berta’s death. Whatever Oscar Dahlberg has told you, it’s the fantasy of a disturbed young man.”

“He told us about the gun you gave him. The .22 registered to Anders Ekerlid, which you stole from his summer cottage after having your security team run a background check on the estranged husband you intended to frame. You’ve been planning this for months, Mr. Eklund. The only thing you didn’t plan was Oscar’s breakdown and his confession.”

The smile finally vanished. His face went blank, a mask of cold calculation. “I want my lawyer.”

“You’ll have one. But first, you’re going to come with us.”

She watched as the handcuffs were applied. The lobby had gone silent. The receptionist was pale, her

hand over her mouth. A few junior analysts stared, their coffee cups forgotten. Magnus Eklund, the man who had built an empire on charm and ruthlessness, was led out of his gilded tower in handcuffs, his reputation crumbling behind him like a falling building.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The interrogation was a masterclass in patience. Magnus's lawyer, a sharp, expensive woman named Annika Berg, deflected every question. Magnus himself sat in his tailored suit, a portrait of injured dignity, answering only with "No comment."

But Tiffany had the evidence. The financial forensics team had traced the shell companies directly to Magnus's personal accounts. They had found the cancelled transfer order, authorized from his own terminal. They had found CCTV footage from a parking garage near the Gallive building on the night of the murder, Magnus's Audi entering at 7:15 PM, leaving at 8:45 PM. And they had found a single, faint fingerprint on the inside of the door to office 1407. It was not Oscar Dahlberg's. It was Magnus Eklund's.

She laid it all out for him, piece by piece, in the interview room. She didn't shout. She didn't threat-

en. She simply built the wall of evidence around him, brick by brick, until he could see no way out.

"You gave Oscar Dahlberg the gun to use as a contingency," she said, her voice calm. "But when he panicked and shot her in the chest, you knew he couldn't be trusted to finish the job. So you did it yourself. You shot her in the head to make sure she was dead. To make sure the blackmail ended. To make sure she couldn't expose you."

Magnus's lawyer leaned in to whisper to him. He listened, then shook his head. When he looked up at Tiffany, the mask was gone. In its place was a profound, weary contempt.

"You think you understand?" he said, his voice low. "You think this is about money? Berta was a brilliant woman, but she was also a woman. And a woman in love cannot be trusted. She wanted everything. She wanted the money, yes. But she also wanted me. She thought that by exposing the embezzlement, she could force me to leave my wife, to start over with her. She was delusional. She thought she could blackmail me into loving her."

"And you couldn't have that."

He laughed, a dry, hollow sound. “I have a reputation, Inspector. I have a company. I have a life. She was a bomb waiting to go off. I defused it. Oscar was the tool. He was a pathetic, lovesick fool who would have done anything for her. When he failed, I did what was necessary.”

“You killed her.”

“I silenced her,” he corrected, his voice hardening. “There’s a difference. I did what any man in my position would have done to protect what he’d built.”

Tiffany looked at him for a long moment. This was the heart of it, she thought. The belief that what he had built, the money, the power, the reputation, was worth more than a human life. That Berta Ekerlid’s existence, her love, her desperation, was just an inconvenience to be managed.

“You’re not a man in a unique position, Mr. Eklund,” she said, gathering her files. “You’re a man in handcuffs. And what you built is already gone.”

She left him there, with his lawyer and his crumbling empire, to face the consequences of his own cold, calculated choices.

8.
The widow's peace

With Magnus Eklund and Oscar Dahlberg in custody, the case was technically closed. But for Tiffany Carney, closure was a myth. It was a word people used to paper over the abyss left by violence. She had learned that from David's death. The case could be solved, the perpetrator charged, but the ripples spread outward, touching lives in ways that could never be fully repaired.

Her final duty was to inform Anders Ekerlid that his stolen gun had been used to kill his wife. She went to the white townhouse in Östermalm, a place that now seemed more mausoleum than home. He answered the door, looking gaunt and older than his years. The divorce papers were still on the hall table, unsigned.

"Detective Carney," he said, his voice flat. "I wondered when you'd come."

"May I come in, Mr. Ekerlid?"

He gave a short, humourless laugh. "Is that a formal question, or do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice," she said quietly.

He stood aside, gesturing her in. The air inside was still, heavy with the scent of cold ash from a dead fireplace. He led her to the sitting room, where the light from the window fell on dust motes drifting in silence. He remained standing by the window, looking out at the street, his back to her.

Tiffany did not sit either. She told him everything. The affair with Magnus, the blackmail, Oscar Dahlberg's role. She told him about the gun, stolen from his summer cottage by a private investigator hired by Magnus, a detail that had been meant to frame him for the murder. He listened in silence, his shoulders rigid.

When she finished, he was quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice was rough.

"A private investigator," he said, not turning around.

"He went to my cottage, broke into my things, all to set me up for her murder." He let out a slow breath. "And Magnus. He really thought I'd just… be the perfect patsy."

"It seems so," Tiffany said.

"She was so clever," he said, more to the window than to her. "That's what I loved about her at first. Her mind. I thought if she applied that cleverness to us, to a life together, we could be unstoppable. But she only applied it to the work. And to him." He turned then, his eyes red but dry. "She was still in love with him, wasn't she? All those years. The affair wasn't about the sex or the money. It was about trying to finally get him to choose her."

Tiffany held his gaze. "I believe so. And when she realised he would never choose her, she tried to force his hand. It was a desperate act, Mr. Ekerlid. It came from a place of deep hurt."

He gave a single, sharp nod. "Desperate. Yes." He moved away from the window at last, walking to a sideboard where a cut-glass decanter sat empty. He picked it up, looked at it, and set it back down. "And Oscar Dahlberg. The boy. He killed her because she threatened to expose him."

"He killed her because he believed she had used him and was about to discard him. He was in love with her, in his own fractured way."

Anders let out a bitter, broken laugh. "In love with her. We all were, it seems. And look where it got us." He looked at her, his expression unreadable. "Do you think she knew, at the end? That it was him?"

"I don't know," Tiffany said honestly. "I hope not."

He absorbed this, his jaw tightening. "I hated her, you know. For the last few months, I truly hated her. The lies. The way she'd look through me, as if I were furniture. I wanted to tear the house apart some days." He paused, his voice dropping. "But I never wanted this. I never wanted any of this."

"I know," Tiffany said. She began to move towards the door, then stopped. "Your gun will be returned to you once the trial is over. I'm sorry for your loss."

He followed her into the hallway, his hand resting on the unsigned divorce papers. "Loss?" He picked up one of the pages, glancing at it before letting it flutter back to the table. "I lost her years ago. This is just the paperwork."

Tiffany hesitated at the door. “What will you do now, Mr. Ekerlid?”

He looked at the papers, then at the closed door to what must have been the master bedroom. “I suppose I’ll sign them,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion. “And then I’ll try to remember the woman I married, before she became a stranger. That’s the only thing left, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes,” Tiffany said gently, “it’s the most important thing.”

He opened the door for her, and for a moment, his composure wavered. “You’ve been… kinder than I expected, Detective. More honest.”

“Honesty is all I have to offer,” she said. “Take care of yourself, Mr. Ekerlid.”

As she walked back to her car, the familiar weight of the case settled into her bones. There was no satisfaction in solving it, only a grim sense of order restored. She thought of Berta Ekerlid, the brilliant woman who had let her past dictate her future, who had tried to use the same ruthless tactics as the man who had wronged her, only to be destroyed by them. She thought of Magnus Eklund, the predator who

had finally met a justice system that cared nothing for his charm. And she thought of Oscar Dahlberg, the boy who had loved a woman who saw him only as a tool, and who had become a killer in his despair.

It was, she reflected, a tragedy of ordinary human flaws, pride, greed, unrequited love, writ large against the cold, glass façade of corporate ambition.

9.
The trial

The trial of Magnus Eklund was a media sensation. For six weeks, the press camped outside the Stockholm District Court, chronicling every twist and turn. The prosecution's case was airtight: the financial records, the forensic evidence, and the testimony of Oscar Dahlberg, who had agreed to testify against Magnus in exchange for a reduced sentence for manslaughter.

Tiffany was the lead witness. She spent three days on the stand, her testimony methodical, unflappable. She laid out the investigation from the moment Marta the cleaner had found the body to the arrest in the Gallive lobby.

It was during her cross-examination that the atmosphere in the courtroom, already thick with tension, became suffocating. Annika Berg, Magnus's formidable lawyer, rose slowly from her chair, a slender file in her hand. She had a reputation for eviscerating witnesses, and her gaze was fixed on Tiffany with the cold precision of a surgeon.

"Detective Inspector," Berg began, her voice smooth as polished steel. "You've painted a very clear picture for us, but I'd like to explore the foundation upon which this picture is built. Is it not true that Oscar Dahlberg was a known obsessive, fired from Gallive for erratic behaviour?"

Tiffany met her gaze. "That's a matter of public record, Ms Berg."

"Is it not possible," Berg continued, pacing slowly before the witness box, "that he acted alone? That he killed Berta Ekerlid in a fit of jealous rage, and then, realising the gravity of his situation, concocted this elaborate story to implicate my client? A desperate man, spinning a desperate fiction to save his own skin?"

Tiffany paused, letting the silence stretch for a moment before she answered. "Mr Dahlberg's psy-

chological profile is not in dispute. But the physical evidence is. His fingerprints were on the .22 calibre weapon, but his DNA was not found on the 9mm shell casings."

Berg stopped pacing. "But you just said his fingerprints were on the murder weapon. That seems rather conclusive."

"It would be," Tiffany replied, "if there had been only one weapon. There were two. The .22 calibre pistol belonged to Mr Dahlberg. It was the weapon he brought with him, in a state of distress, intending to confront Magnus Eklund. However, the fatal shot was from a 9mm. Those casings bore traces of leather glove fibres, specifically, a type of glove found in Mr Eklund's office, confirmed by the manufacturer as a bespoke pair purchased by him three years prior."

Berg waved a dismissive hand. "Fibres. Transferred by any number of means. Hardly the smoking gun, Detective Inspector."

"Then consider the timing of the cancelled financial transfer," Tiffany pressed, her tone unwavering. "One hundred and twenty thousand kronor was authorised from Mr Eklund's personal terminal at 7:48

PM on the night of the murder. That places him at his computer, not in the stairwell as he claimed, where he said he was taking a private phone call between 7:30 and 8:15."

"A computer terminal can be accessed by anyone with a password," Berg countered. "A disgruntled former employee, for instance, seeking to cause further chaos."

"And his car?" Tiffany asked, tilting her head slightly. "The CCTV from the parking garage places his vehicle leaving at 8:45 PM. That gives him a clear window, from the moment he made that transfer to the moment he fled, to have been in the office at the time of the shooting. A disgruntled former employee would not have access to a private, keycard-protected parking garage, nor the terminal, nor the gloves."

Berg opened her mouth to speak, but Tiffany continued, her voice a calm, relentless tide. "Mr Dahlberg's story was inconsistent in places, I grant you. But the forensic timeline is not. It corroborates his account that he was there to witness the murder, not commit it. We have three independent chains of evidence, fibres, digital timestamp and vehicle movement, all converging on Mr Eklund. The rush to

judgement, Ms Berg, would have been to arrest Mr Dahlberg and close the file."

The courtroom was silent. A reporter in the press gallery stopped scribbling, his pen poised in the air. Judge Lundmark peered over his spectacles at the defence counsel. Annika Berg stood motionless for a long moment, her jaw tight. She gave a single, curt nod.

"No further questions," she said, her earlier silkiness now replaced by a clipped finality. She returned to her seat, her shoulders stiff, refusing to glance at Magnus Eklund.

Magnus Eklund did not take the stand. His defence, already fragile, crumbled entirely under the weight of the evidence. The jury deliberated for just under four hours.

When the verdict was read; guilty on all counts of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, embezzlement and perverting the course of justice, Magnus Eklund's face remained impassive. His eyes were fixed on a point somewhere above the judge's head. But Tiffany, sitting in the public gallery, saw his hands clench on the rail of the dock, the knuckles bleaching

white. The mask had slipped, just for a second, revealing the terrified, cornered man beneath. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, with a minimum of twenty years.

Oscar Dahlberg was sentenced to twelve years for manslaughter and complicity. His testimony, and his obvious remorse, had saved him from a harsher sentence. Anders Ekerlid was not present for the verdict. He had left Stockholm, Tiffany heard; he had moved to a small town on the west coast, to try to rebuild a life from the ashes.

10.
Echoes

Six months later, on a mild May evening, Tiffany Carney sat on the balcony of her small apartment in Södermalm. The city was waking up from its long winter, the air carrying the scent of lilacs and the distant sound of boats on the water. A glass of wine was at her elbow, a book unopened in her lap.

The case was over, filed away. But she knew it would never be truly closed for her. She thought about Berta Ekerlid often, not as a victim, but as a woman she had come to understand through the artefacts of her life, the meticulous files, the incisive emails and the photograph from Uppsala showing a young woman with fierce, hopeful eyes. She had been a woman who had tried to win back what she'd lost, and in doing so, had lost everything, including herself.

Tiffany had seen that same pattern in her own grief for David. The desperate need to rewind time, to undo the past. But she had learned, slowly, that the only way forward was through acceptance. David was gone. Berta was gone. The lives they had lived were over, and nothing ...not justice, not revenge, not the most meticulous investigation could bring them back.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Paxton: "New case. Suspicious death in Holmstad. Elderly antique dealer. Thought you'd want it. Details attached."

She smiled faintly. There was always a new case. The dead kept their secrets, and it was her job, her calling, to coax them out into the light. Not for glory, not for closure, but for the simple, stubborn truth. Because the truth, however brutal, was the only thing that could restore a semblance of order to a world that violence had shattered.

She took a final sip of wine, set the glass down, and opened the file. The name of the dead antique dealer stared up at her. She began to read, her mind already shifting gears, clicking into the familiar rhythm of observation, deduction, and the relentless pursuit of the story behind the story.

The echoes of Berta Ekerlid's death would fade, as all echoes do, but the work would continue. It was, Tiffany Carney reflected, the only peace she had ever truly found.

* * * * * * * * * * *

A week later, Tiffany received a small, unmarked package at the station. Inside was a framed photograph. It was the old university picture of Berta Ekerlid and Magnus Eklund and Henrik Ljungberg, the three of them young and laughing on a sun-drenched Uppsala lawn. On the back, in a neat, unfamiliar hand, was written: "She wanted you to have this. She said you would understand. — H.L."

Tiffany looked at the photograph for a long time. Then she placed it on her desk, next to the small, worn picture of David she kept there. Two faces, two stories, two lives cut short. She understood, perhaps better than Henrik Ljungberg knew.

She understood that justice was a flawed, human construct. It could put a man in prison, but it could not restore a single moment of lost happiness. It could not undo the cruel math of human desire, where love curdled into obsession, ambition into greed, and the past, always, reached out to claim the present. The

best she could do was to bear witness, to tell the story, and to ensure that the truth, in all its uncomfortable complexity, was not buried with the dead.

She picked up her coat and headed out into the spring sunshine. There was a dead antique dealer in Holmstad and she had work to do.

The end

The past present killer

Thanos Kalamidas

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A detective Tiffany Carney of Växjö case.

THE PAST PRESENT KILLER

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THANOS KALAMIDAS